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SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA FLAG FLAP: SEEING RED IN LAYOUNE

REF: RABAT 1963

Classified by Political Counselor Craig Karp for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During our visit to Western Sahara, embassy team heard from both sides about a high-profile dispute over the lowering of the Moroccan flag over MINURSO Headquarters. As reported in the press, this had prompted protests in front of MINURSO, and had complicated the often-testy relationship between the UN and local authorities. We wondered what the flap was all about. Its denouement turned out to be a case study on tongue-in-cheek response. End summary.

¶2. (C) After the September departure of the former civilian Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and Chief of MINURSO Mission, MINURSO's military commander, a Danish Maj. General took charge (reftel). A veteran peacekeeper, the general was unhappy that the red Moroccan flag flew next to the blue UN banner in front of the MINURSO Layoune headquarters. Although it had been flying there for all of MINURSO's 15 years, he saw this as contrary to UN international practice, and a form of taking sides. He told us that even a diplomatic star like former SRSG (ex-U.S. Ambassador) Bill Swing could not get Moroccan agreement to lower the flag just 10 centimeters.

¶3. (C) The general told us October 11 that in his acting capacity, he saw an opportunity to remedy this issue. The evening of October 3, he gave the order to lower the flag -- 15 years overdue, but perhaps currently a tad undiplomatic. There was indignant commentary in the Moroccan media. At least one paper, citing his Danish origin, recalled last year's cartoon controversy. Local Moroccan liaison officials protested, but with steely resolve the General held firm.

¶4. (C) A few days later, the local authorities had their response. In place of the lowered banner they planted dozens of large Moroccan flags all around the MINURSO compound. The general and his colleagues now cannot look out of the compound in any direction without seeing a sea of red. As we exited the premises we saw Moroccan workers installing permanent flag stands in place of the temporary stands in place.

¶5. (C) The general did not anticipate that the incident would have a lasting impact on the mission's relations with the GOM. Two days later, however, the new Moroccan Wali (septel) pulled Polcouns aside to raise the flag issue. Could not the U.S. persuade the general to reverse course? Polcouns urged the Wali to see for himself how widely his own banners waved, and decide for himself who had the last laugh. Post will continue to follow this evolving flap.

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Riley